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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 2870  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9355  
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO 2965  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2038  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC  
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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: DEMINING RETURNING TO FULL SPEED  
DESPITE SOME BUMPS

REF: 2005 COLOMBO 2167

SUMMARY

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11. (U) NGOs continued humanitarian demining while Sri Lankan Army (SLA) deminers were still hunkered down following the December and January surge in attacks on security forces by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). While remaining on operational stand down, Department-funded demining contractor RONCO maintained an ambitious training schedule. The Commander of the Army has approved the transfer of 400 soldiers under the authority of the Ministry of Nation Building and Development. SLA worries about the control of the explosives have required NGOs to draw a small amount of explosives daily to clear mines and have hindered NGO demining operations. Even at the height of recent hostilities, the LTTE humanitarian demining unit operated at full capacity. The Halo Trust (HT) and the Danish Demining Group (DDG) remain fully engaged in Jaffna despite a high rate of employee absenteeism, meanwhile on February 22 unknown gunmen threatened the Mine Action Group office in Batticaloa to stop demining in LTTE territory. END SUMMARY.

STANDDOWN

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12. (U) Following their end of year stand-down (Reftel), Halo Trust (HT) and Danish Demining Group (DDG) resumed a full schedule of demining operations in the Jaffna peninsula as of January 9. Although the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) carried out an aggressive campaign against the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) in December and January, neither demining NGO suffered any interruptions in operations. Due to the intensity of LTTE attacks in Jaffna, SLA humanitarian demining operations were suspended in December 2005 and the soldiers assigned to security duty. As the violence spread, the Mine Detecting Dog (MDD) detachment was airlifted from Jaffna to Vavuniya (Reftel), and SLA demining was also suspended in Vavuniya for two weeks in mid-January.

HITTING THE BOOKS

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13. (SBU) On January 16, the final technical working group

was convened regarding the SLA Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) in Colombo. The key personnel from each of the three Military Mine Action Offices (MMAO) were present along with Department-funded technical advisors from RONCO, the U.S. contractor and BGEN Ananda Chandrasiri, commander of the SLA demining squadrons. According to RONCO, two years of training combined with hands-on experience in demining operations have enabled SLA personnel to contribute valuable and practical changes to the SOP. Designated soldiers also completed Advanced Trauma Life Saving courses. While conducting site visits, the RONCO Technical Advisors continue working toward increasing the initiative and leadership skills of the section leaders (Corporals and Sergeants). The importance of strong mid-level management in demining operations is becoming apparent to the section leaders, as many of the officers have withdrawn from daily on-site operations to focus on the role of the Mine Action Office.

#### MAKING PROGRESS

14. (SBU) Although RONCO was unable to work with and observe the SLA during demining operations during the stand down, important training and technical improvements continued. Ten students completed a three week para-vet course in January adding further capacity to care for the Mine Detecting Dogs (MDDs). At the same time, four soldiers started training on the basic operation, maintenance and safety of a variety of mechanical mine clearance systems.

#### CHANGE OF COMMAND AND CONTROL

16. (SBU) BGEN Deepal Alwis will assume command of the SLA Engineering brigade in March from retiring BGEN Chandrasiri.

Army Commander LGEN Sarath Fonseka has approved the transfer of 400 soldiers to the Ministry of Nation Building and Development. This transfer to civilian control will allow other foreign governments and humanitarian agencies, who were sometimes skittish about funding the military, to contribute to the government demining effort.

17. (SBU) Although the Commander of Security Forces Jaffna set no firm date on when the SLA could return to the clearance sites, he took the important first step of endorsing the technical survey of minefields contained within the High Security Zones. This move will help speed the return of HSZs to civilians when -- and if -- the Government decides to do so. The SLA remains concerned about the security of the monthly allotment of explosives issued to INGOs to destroy mines in place. Current procedures place a burden on the NGO deminers and are not uniformly adhered to. (Note: Demining NGOs are allotted 10Kg of plastic explosives a month. This is half the amount found in an LTTE claymore. No explosives have ever been stolen from deminers. End Note.) Since demining INGOs do not have access to Army authorities inside the HSZ, a temporary building has been allocated inside of the main gate at the Palali camp. At the first meeting between security forces and demining INGOs, held on the January 31, INGOs complained about a lack of liaison regarding mine clearance issues. It was agreed that the main conduit for this liaison will be the MMAO Coordinator and problems should try to be solved at the local level rather than in Colombo.

#### FEAR OR TIGER FLU

18. (SBU) Although their demining operations have not been affected, both Halo Trust and DDG have had high rates of long term absenteeism in the recent months. There are several possible reasons, including harassment of Tamil deminers by security forces, abduction of the deminers by either pro or anti-government forces, the possibility that the absentees were actually LTTE cadres recalled to active duty, or the missing men were "obliged" to attend LTTE home guard training. The LTTE humanitarian demining units maintained a

full workload, even during the height of recent hostilities. To the east in Batticaloa district, two armed men entered the office of the INGO Mine Action Group (MAG) on February 22, waving pistols and demanding that MAG stop operations in LTTE-held territory. (Note: MAG, DDG and Norwegian People's Aid provide salaries, equipment and technical advice to LTTE humanitarian demining units. End Note.) While MAG temporarily closed that office, the program manager told poloff that the demining tasks in that area were almost complete and that MAG intended to reopen and finish the job.

COMMENT

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19. (SBU) While the Army has not yet returned to its demining duties despite the decrease in LTTE attacks over the last month, overall demining efforts continue apace. Even at the height of recent hostilities, the LTTE humanitarian demining unit sent representatives to the National Mine Action Steering Committee meeting in Colombo to report on their progress. New SLA commanders are learning that demining NGOs can be a civil affairs asset and improve the security of their own troops by removing old and poorly marked mine lines that pose a hazard to their own troops.  
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